

LEO MANZONE

Oral History: **EDITED VERSION**

Interview #189 by Dana Gowan on May 30, 1986

Immigrated from Sicily, Italy in 1921 at the age of 8



Read the oral history. Jot down answers to the questions as you go along. Then discuss the answers in your group.

Your group's dramatic skit will focus on what happened to Leo Manzone's family at Ellis Island. As you read, think about how immigration laws affected Leo's family and how they responded to those laws.

GOWAN: This is Dana Gowan and I'm speaking with Mr. Leo Monzone. [NOTE: All his official papers give his name as **MANZONE**. We have corrected this error except when the interviewer is speaking.] on the 30th day of May, 1986. We're beginning this interview at 2:05. We're about to interview Mr. Monzone about his immigration experience from Italy in the year 1921. It's interview number 189. Mr. Monzone, if I could begin with where and when were you born.

MANZONE: I was born in [Feradefalco] province of Agrigento, Sicily. [Above: Leo in 1932, age 19, from his Certificate of Citizenship.] My father was a lend-lease landowner. He rented the fruit orchards from somebody. Then, one day when my father went to sell his fruit, his orchards, he was held up [robbed]. And they took the money away from him, and he recognized the voice of this particular person, because he spoke so unique that my father was sure it was him that held him up, because he had his face covered.

He went to the police, this man got arrested, and sure enough, the money that was stolen from my father was in this man's pocket. And so, they put this guy in jail. And he got so many months, or whatever. And so my father got scared, and he said, "This guy here is a tough guy, and when he comes out, he gonna cause me a lot of problems." So he goes back to the owner and he gives him back all everything, he says, "Take your property, I don't want it. Not only do I have my fruit stolen by people, I had to shoot one of them, and I thought I did kill one one day. I'm going back home."

So he went back home with us children. At that time, it was very bad in Europe, because no jobs, no nothing, and everybody was coming to America. And the only way to get here was by slow boats. Some boats took twenty days, eighteen days. So my father took a French line that took fourteen days, the S.S. Providence, that took fourteen days to get here. In fact, it took sixteen days, because it was stormy, it was very stormy, and we were delayed. And so my father sold everything except the house that he bought from my mother.

GOWAN: He came here because that man—

MANZONE: That's right. He was scared that he would come out and he would cause him trouble. There was that inspiration of coming to America, because everybody was saying that America was rich.

When the people coming here, a lot of the people lived four, five, six, seven people in one room, like they do right now. They used to have ten, fifteen, twenty people asleep—six over there, four here, eight there, and sometimes they used to feed them garbage, and they used to pay big money for it. The men suffer here, all alone, with no women. And so, my mother stayed in Europe, with us, and my father came to America.

What conflict lead Leo's father to come to America?

Why didn't the father bring his wife and children with him to the US?

GOWAN: When did your father leave?

MANZONE: In 1913 or '14. Before the war. And then the war broke out, and there was no coming or going. After the war was over, my father want to call us here, in the States. Meanwhile, my brother was rented to farmers. He was only eight years old, nine years old, like it was a stable boy. They used to hire them out, rent them out, and they used to give my mother a little money for the service the boy did, feeding the animals or whatever. I was too young. My brother didn't care to go to school. So my mother, 'cause she had to have some money, my father was here and she didn't receive much money from my father—why?

So, my mother had to go to work, cracking almonds with a stone, because years ago there wasn't no machines. Everything was hand work. And my brother was hired out to get a little money in. And he was a stable boy. And he didn't get to go to school. But I went to school. My sister went to school; she wanted to be a teacher, in fact. But she had to go to work also. And my mother had to go to work to [make] the payment on the house, after my father put the first payment down. And so, my mother struggled.

GOWAN: What was your father's job here in this country?

MANZONE: My father was in Pennsylvania during the war, working in the mill, in the iron mills. They used to put 'em in trucks here, like animals, and used to transport them in many towns in upstate New York and Pennsylvania. Because they had to have men there to work. And my father used to tell me, many times, that he never knew where he was, because they were taken there by trucks. And they used to get together, sit down, play cards, and it seemed to be that my father always lost. He never came on top; he always lost. This my father related to us, when he was in a good mood.

My mother tried to earn money to put together to support us. She used to bake pastries and cakes for neighbors, for weddings and so forth. And my mother was able to derive that money to support us, because my father did not send us money enough. And my mother knew why. My father liked to play cards. Even when he was freshly married to my mother, she knew this. And she realized that a man being alone here, my father followed the same system of living.

But my aunts, my mother's sisters, came to America before, also, and they put the money together, with some they got from my father, so that my mother could buy the tickets, to pay for the passport, to come

here, meet my father. It wasn't all my father's money. It was part of the money came from my aunts, because they want to help my mother.

What did Leo's brother do rather than going to school? How did the brother feel about missing school?

Describe Leo's father's work life. What did he do for fun with the other workmen?

Why couldn't the father send back enough money to the family to help them come over? What did Leo's mother do to work things out?

GOWAN: And when were your mother and brother and yourself able to leave?

MANZONE: 1922 or 1923, around that time. When the boat came, we were stuck on the ship. They were spraying us with flea ointment, because the boat was very dirty. The boat was filthy. One day, they push all us all out from the lower deck, and they push us all upstairs, and they had to fumigate all the gosh-darn lower deck of the ship. It would smell terrible, because some of these people had ants, bugs, whatever, I don't know.

GOWAN: What kind of accommodations did you have? Where did you sleep on the boat?

MANZONE: Just like decks...

GOWAN: Like a bunk.

MANZONE: That's it, just like that. I knew when they used that, because our mother, in our home, my mother, she kept the house, and there was four rooms in the house, and there was a bed for us, for my brother and I, for my sisters, my mother, she slept alone. And but when we got into the boat, we just like animals. I never experienced that.

GOWAN: What was the family group that was traveling together? It was your mother--

MANZONE: My mother, and my sisters and brother, that's all. Then when we landed, through the night, after a while we saw so many row boats all around, all around the boat, with people, waiting. My mother says, "There's your father! There's your father over there. We said, "We don't know who he is." It was my sister, my brother, and I, because the other sister was born here. After my mother came here. And she says, "That's your father over there!" She said, "You see, over there!" I says, "Who?" She says, "That fellow—man over there that's carrying a bag." And he raised bananas, the first time I ever saw bananas, somebody sold him some bananas, and he brought bananas with him, and he was on the boat with the others. It was an open row boat, you know. I saw a person there, but I forgot how my father looked like.

GOWAN: Did he come on [your] boat?

MANZONE: No! No, they were not allowed on the boat. So, come time that we march out in Ellis Island, all the passengers they were on the line, and they was inspectors on both sides.

GOWAN: Did you remember anything about the medical exams on Ellis Island?

MANZONE: They, they—now, I don't want to say it—they looked, they're checking just like animals. They open your mouth, check, the fingers, [pass by]. The people were coming in in droves. At that time, you was just—you was in a daze. I don't know about you, [or your dad] but because maybe you was first class or second class, but we came, we came third class. And there was a difference between first class and second class and third class on boat. The first class got better food, better treatment, and everything. But the way we were sleep down there like animals, in the third deck below.

GOWAN: You said during the medical exams you were treated like animals.

MANZONE: Not [im]polite, nothing like this, because maybe we did not know any better. I don't know. Because I was only a kid; I was just eight years old, nine years old. I don't know. But to me, to me, it was it was a . . . dream, just what I'm experiencing right now.

And they had something, a little thing like this, like a book, with little pages and so forth, and they called, “Monzone, Leo, Calogero [**ca-LO-je-ro**],” ‘cause my brother's name is Calogero. Charlie, American is Charlie. But in his native birth is Calogero.

First came my brother, and that inspector, he took the little book, he opened it up, and he went like this to him in Italian to read, “the.” Well, my brother was not able to read. And he was sixteen years of age going on seventeen. And in that particular day, those days, it was grownup, you know, that age. As soon as they saw he was unable to read, he was pulled out.

My brother was asked by the inspector there if my brother would like to go to school [. . .] and he did not answer positive. Maybe if he would have done so, maybe he would have been released. But he was not interested in school. This I remember, that he did say that. And under this technicalities, the inspector did not let him go by, see?

GOWAN: Did the inspectors ask you to read something?

MANZONE: No. I was underage, so I didn't qualify. I was born in 1908—no, I was born in 1909, and for getting my working papers a year ahead of time, I changed the nine into eight. Because [otherwise Leo was too young to] get a job here. I couldn't get the working papers from the Board of Education here unless I was fourteen years old. And with falsifying the birth, and I look as if I was fifteen years old, and I got the summer job.

I was less than fourteen years of age, and I was able to read anyhow, because I had six years of school in there. But [Leo's brother Charlie] didn't get to go to school. He didn't like school. And my brother was pulled out [of the line].

GOWAN: Do you remember if the inspectors asked your mother to read something?

MANZONE: No. My mother, because she was a woman, they never asked her. They never ask my sister either, because my sister was past twenty years. But my sister, [who was] married, she was smart. She could read a little. But they didn't ask her or my father or my mother anything about this. But my [younger] sister, Louise, she went to school. She was very clever; she went to second year high. She was very smart. She wanted to be a teacher. And I got along. But my brother, who was the boy that didn't go to school, and he paid the price that he's paying yet.

How does Leo describe the lower deck of the ship that took Leo's family to America?

Why did immigration officials pull Leo's brother Calogero? What did he say to them that changed his entire life?

Why didn't immigration officials ask Leo to read? How about his mother?

We went to a very big reception room. There we met my father. But my brother was not there. My brother was detained. My mother begin to cry. She says, "My son! My son!" So my father says, "Where is he?" She says, "They took him away." So, we had to go out in a desk, there was one man there sitting above, and he says, "You gotta go for information," pointing a finger. So we went for information from there. They said he was detained because he was illiterate. He didn't know how to write or read, my brother. But that was his fault because he didn't care to go to school. My mother cried, and she cried, and she cried.

Finally, my father took us, and we landed in my aunt's house. At the time she used to live at East Eighteenth Street in a four-family house, and she had a little apartment there, and I stayed by the window and I used to see people go by. I never saw so many people in my life. But my mother, she was crying because my brother was not there.

My mother didn't know what to do. My father didn't know nothing—my father was just as [uninformed] as a person that would land today. From overseas. My father used to go play cards all the time, amongst all kinds of people [who] all spoke Italian. And he felt it was not necessary to learn English. He knew nothing about anything.

So, somebody says to somebody there, says, "Why don't you go to our church?" My mother didn't know nothing; my mother didn't know what's going on. My father knew even less. So they told us to go to this church, on Fourteenth Street, off First Avenue. My mother went there crying, with my aunt. The aunt told them that we came here to see my father, and they held my brother back. And the priest heard the whole story. He didn't say nothing. And we took for granted that he was going to take care [of the problem].

So my mother, every second day or so forth, she was allowed to go see my brother in Ellis Island. They used to take her with the Second Avenue El to South Ferry. There was the boat, they used to take it to Ellis Island, and it was free. She was allowed to see my brother twice a week. When she went on the fourteenth day, my brother was not there.

GOWAN: On the fourteenth day?

MANZONE: On the fourteenth or fifteenth day, my brother was not there anymore. And my mother ask, says, “What happened?” And she could piece together that my brother was put back on the boat that brought him here, that's the way they had those days, and he was returned to Italy, to Sicily. Now, in Sicily, we had no relatives, because my father was the only boy in the family. And he had no sisters, or nothing. The house was closed. But maybe God said to my mother, “Don't sell the house.” She just lock it up, and it was four walls [with nothing inside]. So, my brother was shipped to Europe. And when my brother [arrived back to Sicily], he did not know where to go. He was just sixteen years of age, and he went to distant relatives.

GOWAN: So after he was pulled from the line, you never saw him again on Ellis Island?

MANZONE: No, no, only my mother saw him two or three times, and I did not, no.

GOWAN: It's hard to believe that they would separate family, like this.

MANZONE: It happened, it happened. It happened. When this thing happened, then my mother was taken to the Italian Consul, just when my brother was taken to Europe. After we were introduced to a consul, the consul says in a very discouraging way, he says, “You should have come here!” My mother says, innocently, “I did not know this.” He said, “That's why we're here, to help out people!” You understand? So, ignorance is not—that's why we pay a price, my mother, especially. My brother is paying a price yet, for not knowing to say the right thing at the right time. And it has been a thorn in the family, my brother.

GOWAN: Why didn't your brother ever try to come back?

MANZONE: My brother got married after [two or three years of] staying with this relative, and we felt that as long as he was married, he was happier with a husband and wife, as a team.

GOWAN: Within those two or three years, why he didn't try to make another—

MANZONE: We were green. My mother, she kept on going to this church that never did accomplish anything. And because of the language barrier, and my father habit of playing cards, and the habit of my father that he was living alone here for eight years...my mother was the one [who tried to solve the problem]. But she could not talk, she could not do anything about it. She sobbed and she cried, and we kids grew up here, separated. And, things were not easy in this country, in those days.

Where did Leo's mother go for help about Calogero's immigration? Why might this have been a good choice back in Sicily, but a bad choice here?

In your opinion, should immigration officials have let Calogero into the US or sent him back because he was illiterate? Explain.

GOWAN: On Ellis Island, was there any offer made of having a family member go back with your brother, like your mother go back—

MANZONE: I cannot say, but I know that in those days, they had regulations that the shipping company that brought people here, they had the responsibility of bringing back passengers where they come from because they brought them here. 'Cause they should have found out if those people were able to read or not. And they neglected or whatever it was, I have no idea, but I know that the same French line took back my brother when the same boat returned here.

GOWAN: So, did you go to school, start out going to school in America?

MANZONE: Oh yes, sure, sure. I loved school...First they put me here C class, to teach me the a-b-c, and being that I had Italian schooling, I found it a little easier in learning the a-b-c. After a year, they put me in the third grade. I skipped 3A, 4A, 5A, 6A, 7A, until I reached 7A-1, when my mother says, you gotta quit school. But I like art so much that [at] P.S. 19 on Fourteenth Street and First Avenue, I used to do all the art work for the whole school.

I want to be an artist, and my mother pulled me out of school, because I had to go to work. Because then my mother got ill. I was fourteen years old. My father opened a grocery store, he stuck me in the grocery store. Five o'clock he used to put on his jacket [and] go play cards. I used to close the store at nine, ten, eleven o'clock at night. I never played with kids.

Because of my liking for the art, I was left alone. I used to do a lot of pictures. I liked art, I like art. And until I was thirty-two years of age, I was still full of hopes that I was going to be an artist and go to art school. In fact, I did go to art school. When I went to art school, to qualify...he says, "You're too old now, you cannot enter no more to this school." I took all the work I had done and I gave it to my sister. I said to her, "Here, that's it."

When an immigrant was turned back, who had to take him or her back?

How did Leo feel about school? What skill did he learn there?

What role did Leo's parents play in the success or failure of his dreams? Explain.

GRAPHIC ORGANIZER for Ellis Island Oral History

NAME of immigrant: **LEO MONZONE**

FROM: _____

YEAR he came to the US: _____

AGE upon arrival: _____

PUSH-PULL: Why did his family choose to leave home and come to America?

BECAUSE:

